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## **INTELLECTUAL DUELLING AS A MEANS OF SELF-COMPREHENSION IN *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST***

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is an international best-seller which extensively discusses the racialization process of Muslim Americans after the events of September 11. The novel attempts to reconnect the American and Muslim worlds which were divided in the aftermath of 9/11. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* takes place within the space of one evening in the café of Lahore where the protagonist (a bearded Pakistani man called Changez) tells a nervous American stranger the incredible life story of his advancements in the USA and eventual escape from there. The life of a Pakistani immigrant, successful in the corporate world, is changed by 9/11. The novel problematizes the psychological and social effects of September 11 by depicting the dramatic and conflicting changes within the narrator's identity. In fact, the hero is torn between his identities as an American student, as a New Yorker, as a representative of Underwood Samson, and finally, as a Pakistani.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is formally experimental. The novel uses the device of dramatic monologue in which the Pakistani narrator continually addresses an American narratee who is never heard from directly. The aim of the paper is to analyze the peculiarities of the dramatic monologue in the context of the author's intentions to contemplate on the problems of racialization in the modern USA. The novel is essentially an extensive speech uttered by the protagonist. Ultimately, Changez's arguments and reasoning may be interpreted as a soliloquium. The narrator strives to convince his partner (as well as himself), and eventually achieves the condition of self-cognition and self-fulfillment. The interlocutor's presence can be

traced only from the speaker's discourse; no other clues are provided. The dramatic monologue is essentially "a lyrical-dramatic-narrative hybrid. It absorbs an emotional expressiveness from lyrics, a speaker who is not the poet from drama, and elements of mimetic detail and retrospective structuring from narrative" [5, 80]. In this context, Warwick E. Slinn observes that "this particular hybrid, which developed its recognizable features during the early Victorian period in the 1830s, followed several decades of destabilizing generic categories" [5, 81]. It is relevant to mention that *The Fall* (1956) by Albert Camus also follows the traditions of the dramatic monologue. As a matter of fact, Mohsin Hamid was inspired by the narrative model of *The Fall*, where the protagonist also narrates his story to a stranger in one long philosophical rant.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* stimulates the reader to adopt the role of a partner in conversation. Indeed, interlocutors in the dramatic monologues "may be represented by some form of functional substitute (e.g. a mirror or self-images), and they are constituted more by the speaker's perceptions than by any separate reality. Nevertheless, they are a key element of the dramatic aspect of monologues that directs attention outwards to the speakers' social contexts" [2, 81]. Admittedly, the dramatic monologue is an effective rhetorical device. Indeed, "by representing speakers talking about themselves and how they construct their perceptions, the dramatic monologue seems an ideal form to expose these subjective processes and how they relate to cultural beliefs" [5, 91]. Samuel Silas Curry argues that "there is some purpose at stake; the speaker must cause decisions on some point of issue" [1, 19]. It is generally agreed that "a dramatic monologue works actively to accomplish something for its speakers, perhaps something they are overtly seeking – some kind of dramatic transformation of a situation or a self" [4, 68]. Hence, in the course of complex ruminations, reflections and internal transformations, Changez ultimately regains his personal integrity.

Born in Pakistan, Changez (the Urdu variant of the name Genghis) is a talented and bright international student at Princeton University who tries his best to adapt to the meritocratic atmosphere of the USA. In the aftermath of September 11, the

protagonist's residence in the USA is marked with the experience of racialization, that is, the social process which involves the distinguishing and identification of people on the basis of their ethnicity, race, religion, culture, habits and the like.

The phenomenon of racialization inevitably entails the inequality, different treatment and eventually marginalization of the racialized group. It also may trigger harassment on the part of the racializers. At first, Changez enjoys all kinds of merits of an international student in the prestigious university: "I knew in my senior year that I was something special" [2, 5]. At Princeton, he feels quite free and natural: "I conducted myself in public like a young prince, generous and carefree" [2, 11], and playing this role seems to be quite a success: "most people I met were taken in by my public persona" [2, 11]. The cultural diversity of New York initially attracts Changez who feels almost at home in the atmosphere of cosmopolitanism, tolerance and open mindedness: "Urdu was spoken by taxicab drivers; the presence, only two blocks from my East Village apartment, of a samosa- and channa-serving establishment called the Pak-Punjab Deli" [2, 33]. Changez can wear kurta and thereby feels "completely comfortable on the subway in this attire" [2, 48] since it gives him the stylish looks. However, the true nature of America's tolerance is vividly exposed in the aftermath of September 11. The post-9/11 world in the USA, where Muslims Americans are racialization as terrorists, becomes for Changez an intolerable place to live in. Changez automatically becomes an alien, the "other". In fact, his perspective becomes increasingly racialized. When the World Trade Center is destroyed, his Middle-Eastern outer appearance immediately transforms from a natural feature of the multicultural city into the alienating factor. Changez's self is thus sweepingly developed in the context of the traumatic experience of "otherness".

At first, Changez obviously shares the ideas of the American cosmopolitanism and tries to ignore or even destroy a number of the racial stereotypes and generalized opinions as to his ethnicity. For instance, during his vacation with a group of Princetonians, Changez indulges in ambiguous jokes which will very soon become inappropriate and even dangerous: "When my turn came, I said I hoped one day to be the dictator of an Islamic Republic with nuclear capability; the others appeared

shocked, and I was forced to explain that I had been joking” [2, 29]. In fact, the stereotypical views on Pakistan annoy Changez. For example, during the dinner at Erica’s place, her father classifies Changez on the basis of his appearance and therefore reflexively identifies him as a non-drinker which brings along the embarrassing situation: “As we took our seats for the meal, he lifted a bottle of red wine and said to me, You drink? “He’s twenty-two,” Erica’s mother said on my behalf, in a tone that suggested, *So of course he drinks.*” “I had a Pakistani working for me once”. Erica’s father said. “Never drank” [2, 53]. At the same time the hero experiences the feelings of national pride which sometimes are annoyed: “Four thousand years ago, we, the people of the Indus River basin, had cities... while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians. Now our cities were largely unplanned... And America had universities with individual endowments greater than our national budget for education” [2, 34].

Thus, the events of 9/11 have exacerbated the protagonist’s national self-consciousness. Despite his achievements and success, Changez develops doubts as to his place in the USA and America’s role in the world politics in general. The September 11 attack, as well as the consequences of the American foreign policy in his native land, reinforces his doubts and resentment. He realizes that Pakistan is nothing but a puppet in the context of America’s international manipulations: “I felt powerless; I was angry at our weakness, at our vulnerability to intimidation of this sort from our – admittedly much larger – neighbor to the east. Yes, we had nuclear weapons, and yes, our soldiers would not back down, but we were being threatened nonetheless, and there was nothing I could do about it but lie in my bed, unable to sleep” [2, 128]. Eventually it results in his abandonment of the USA and active national participation in his homeland.

When Changez experiences racialization on the basis of his appearance and origin after the attacks on the World Trade Center, an important point is that the protagonist does not attempt to fit in the American society any more. On the contrary, Changez decides to emphasize his foreignness. Thus, the main hero actually refuses to assimilate; he defiantly takes up the challenge from his racializers and deliberately

alienates himself. In fact, the protagonist strives to identify himself with Pakistan as much as possible. Thus, the atmosphere of pre- and post-September 11 dramatically changes in terms of Changez's identification and self-positioning. In this context, Changez grows a beard. This is actually an important stage in the development of his Pakistani identity, since the main hero tries to resemble his father and the elder brother: "It was perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind" [2, 130]. That is to say, Changez aspires to return to the origins. As a matter of fact, Changez's beard becomes the hallmark of the protagonist's national identity and the symbol of affiliation with his native land. Changez's deliberate change of appearance actually catalyzes the hero's racialization: "More than once, travelling in the subway – where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in – I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares" [2, 130]. Thus, the comfortable feeling of "seamlessly blending in" immediately gives way to racial intolerance.

It is necessary to observe that before 9/11 the hero tried to detach himself from his racial identity: "I ignored as best I could the rumors I overheard at the Pak-Punjab Deli: Pakistani cabdrivers were being beaten to within an inch of their lives; the FBI was raiding mosques, shops, and even people's houses; Muslim men were disappearing, perhaps into shadowy detention centers for questioning or worse <...> Thus clad in my armor of denial I was able to focus with continuing and noteworthy success on my job" [2, 95]. Thus, the protagonist's endeavors are focused primarily at blurring his racial feature; he aspires to blend into the melting pot of America.

As a matter of fact, Changez seeks to blur his Muslim self and approximate the white American identity by playing the role of Erica's deceased boyfriend while they are making love: "It was as though we were under a spell, transported where I was Chris and she was with Chris, and we made love with a physical intimacy that Erica and I had never enjoyed <...> I watched her shut eyes, and her shut eyes watched him" [2, 105]. In such a manner, the protagonist symbolically overcomes the gap between the worlds of East and West, he actually conquers the feeling of being a

“foreign substance”: “Her body denied mine no longer” [2, 105]. In other words, Changez is really eager to become a part of Erica’s life, as well as a part of the American corporate world, and thus he goes all lengths in order to achieve this aim. The hero is also eager about testing the role of the American meritocrat: “On that day, I did not think of myself as a Pakistani, but as an Underwood Samson trainee, and my firm’s impressive offices made me proud” [2, 34]. During his conversations with the Filipinos, he even tries to act and talk as much “American” as possible.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that in the course of the novel, the author actually tends to challenge and reevaluate the conventional meaning of the word “fundamentalist” which nowadays automatically implies primarily the Islamic extremism and terrorism. As a matter of fact, Mohsin Hamid suggests an alternative way to interpret this word. In the novel, the fundamentalist phenomenon is basically applied in terms of depiction of the practices and traditions in the financial world of the USA. For instance, the employees of Underwood Samson are actually encouraged to “focus on the fundamentals” [2, 153]. The enthusiastic “fundamentalists” of Underwood Samson are totally concentrated upon attaining the maximum possible profit. Thus, the corporate world of the USA which ignores the human relations and moral values is basically compared to the extremity of Islam. In fact, the main hero is initially very excited about this phenomenon; he is proud to be a part of it. When Changez meets Erica’s father it becomes obvious that the protagonist tends to prize the corporate values above everything: “it was apparent from his demeanor that he was a man of consequence in the corporate world” [2, 53].

However, Changez loses interest in this kind of activity after 9/11 and decides to terminate his participation in the “melting pot”: “All I knew was that my days of focusing on fundamentals were done” [2, 153]. That is to say, the protagonist’s decision to quit the corporate world symbolically renders Changez a “reluctant” fundamentalist. Thus, before September 11 the protagonist strives to assimilate with his new homeland. However, after the traumatic effects of the post-9/11 atmosphere the time to regain his true identity has come. The events of September 11 have not only destabilized the general situation in the world, but have also affected the

individual lives, have actually changed them forever. After the collapse of the twin towers, Changez's new home is no longer hospitable, his comfortable life is overturned in an instant, forcing him to contemplate whether he has chosen his place in this world correctly: "I resolved to look about me with an ex-janissary's gaze" [2, 156]. Pakistan eventually becomes a revitalizing place for Changez's national and cultural identity: "Such journeys have convinced me that it is not always possible to restore one's boundaries after they have blurred" [2, 173]. On the other hand, the United States which has provided the protagonist with education, success and advancement suddenly turns into the hotbed of injustice, prejudice and racism.

Thus, the novel takes the form of a debate between the protagonist and a silent American listener. This one-sided conversation implicates an interlocutor, and thus actualizes the interpreting function of the novel's audience. After much effort to become integrated within the American society, the protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* develops an understanding that his racial identity will never be completely and unconditionally accepted into this "melting pot". The 9/11 events provide the sufficient impulse to change the triumph of tolerance for the climate of fear and suspicion; to treat a bright Princeton graduate as an outsider on the basis of his ethnicity. Throughout the novel, Changez strives to find his true identity. The dramatic monologue in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* involves complex ruminations, reflections and internal transformations of the narrator. Eventually, Changez retrieves his Pakistani self; the hero achieves the condition of self-cognition and self-fulfillment. Hence, in the course of his racialization experience, the protagonist ultimately regains his personal integrity, his "stable core" [2, 168].

### **Анотація**

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### **ІНТЕЛЕКТУАЛЬНИЙ ДВОБІЙ ЯК ЗАСІБ САМОПІЗНАННЯ У РОМАНІ “ФУНДАМЕНТАЛІСТ МИМОВОЛІ”**

У статті проаналізовано особливості втілення техніки “драматичного монологу” у романі Мохсіна Хаміда “Фундаменталіст мимоволі”. Роман

набуває характеру дискусії між головним героєм та мовчазним американським слухачем. Ця одностороння розмова передбачає присутність слухача і співрозмовника, і, таким чином стимулює читача перейняти роль партнера у дискусії. У контексті бурхливого “драматичного монологу” відбувається расизація національної ідентичності протагоніста; автор розмірковує над психологічними і соціальними наслідками трагедії 11 вересня. Формат “драматичного монологу” забезпечує продуктивне розкриття внутрішнього світу наратора, поступові зміни його світосприйняття, саморепрезентації та самопозиціонування.

**Ключові слова:** “драматичний монолог”, расизація, наратор, наррататор.

### **Аннотация**

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#### **ИНТЕЛЛЕКТУАЛЬНЫЙ ПОЕДИНОК КАК СРЕДСТВО САМОПОЗНАНИЯ В РОМАНЕ “ФУНДАМЕНТАЛИСТ ПОНЕВОЛЕ”**

В статье проанализированы особенности реализации техники “драматического монолога” в романе Мохсина Хамида “Фундаменталист поневоле”. Роман приобретает характер дискуссии между главным героем и молчаливым американским слушателем. Этот односторонний разговор предполагает присутствие слушателя и собеседника, и, таким образом стимулирует читателя перенять роль партнера в дискуссии. В контексте бурного “драматического монолога” происходит расизация национальной идентичности протагониста; автор размышляет над психологическими и социальными последствиями трагедии 11 сентября. Формат “драматического монолога” обеспечивает продуктивное раскрытие внутреннего мира нарратора, постепенные изменения его мировосприятия, саморепрезентации и самопозиционирования.

**Ключевые слова:** “драматический монолог”, расизация, нарратор, наррататор.



## Summary

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### **INTELLECTUAL DUELLING AS A MEANS OF SELF-COMPREHENSION IN *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST***

The paper analyzes the implementation of the “dramatic monologue” technique in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid. The novel assumes the character of discussion between the protagonist and an American silent listener. This unilateral conversation suggests the presence of a companion, and thus encourages the reader to adopt the partner’s role in this discussion. In the context of rapid “dramatic monologue” the racialization of the protagonist’s national identity takes place; the author reflects on the psychological and social consequences of the September 11 tragedy. The format of dramatic monologue effectively discloses the inner world of the narrator, the gradual changes in his outlook, self-representation and self-positioning.

**Keywords:** “dramatic monologue”, racialization, narrator, narratee.

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